

Thomas Alva Edison: American Myth. By Wyn Wachhorst. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1981. pp. vii + 328. \$US15.

Professor Wachhorst has written not a biography of Thomas Edison but an analysis of the great inventor as an American cultural symbol. The book takes its cue from a tradition in American intellectual and cultural history, epitomized by Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* and John William Ward's *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age*. The basis for Wachhorst's research, therefore, is not the voluminous Edison archives

but the vast literature about Thomas Edison consisting of books, pieces in popular magazines, and articles in the general press. A rough idea of the quantitative extent of this literature can be gleaned from the fact that Wachhorst's bibliography takes up 42 pages and even then the author does not make any attempt to chronicle the very extensive coverage which Edison received in American daily newspapers.

The book divides Edison's career into several periods and analyzes the imagery associated with each. It begins with Edison, the wizard, an appellation associated with the invention and exploitation of the phonograph between 1878 and 1888. This was a time when Edison worked in his country laboratory, near Menlo Park, New Jersey, and observers pictured him as a 'midnight workman' contending with 'supernatural forces', 'a modern alchemist' and using 'a magnetic wand' to change 'everyday knowledge into the pure gold of new applications'. This Thomas Edison was 'at work in his laboratory, deep in his conjuring of Nature while the world sleeps' (p. 25).

A second phase in Edison's perception by the American public came in the first three decades in the twentieth century. By this time Edison had emerged as a premier inventor associated with electricity and credited with such innovations as incandescent lighting, the distribution of electricity in cities on a large commercial scale, and motion pictures. By this time, Edison had shed his 'mad scientist' image to become associated with the concepts of 'innocence and power'. This Edison started life as a young boy, a regular Tom Sawyer ('a typical American boy') who was 'barefoot, adventurous, mischievous, curious, an imaginative sprout who is nevertheless imbued with Yankee ingenuity, canniness, practicality, and horse sense' (p. 67). Wachhorst suggested it was no accident that MGM's movie, *Young Thomas Edison*, 'which grossed over a million dollars at 1940 prices, starred Mickey Rooney, who began his career in the "Our Gang" series and *Boys Town*, went on to play Huck Finn and became the number one box office attraction in 1939 and 1940 as Andy Hardy, the typical American boy' (ibid.). This Thomas Edison reconciled scientific innovations with the basic American values that were associated with middle America as it developed the Ohio-Mississippi Valley in the middle and late nineteenth century.

Later, particularly by the second and third decades of the twentieth century, another Edison emerged, this one was a 'practical, democratic individualist'. In short, Edison moved from his position of a brilliant inventor to that of great American (p. 131). Later, Edison became characterized as the 'last great hay seed'. Finally, in the period since World War II, Edison's reputation has declined sharply. Some have questioned the importance of his contributions and his scientific credentials. Others such as Art Buchwald 'made a joke of it all' (p. 211).

While Wachhorst's book is thoroughly researched it is very uneven. And there are a number of problems. As one reads through, it quickly becomes apparent that Edison can be found to symbolize almost any

trend or concept one wants to pick in American history. Part of the problem with the book is that the author relies for his research primarily upon an analysis of the 'Edison literature'. In order to determine how Edison emerged as a symbol, Wachhorst makes a count of adjectives in the popular literature which described Edison's character traits. He analyzes each period by percentages. Thus we get a count of adjectives associated with Edison's intellectual ability. These ranged from genius through analytical and curious. Other adjectives counted were such terms as democratic, practical, individualistic, nonconforming, patient, painstaking, moralistic, aggressive, bold, quiet, courteous, shrewd in business etc. (pp. 234-235). Wachhorst's tables make interesting reading but they tell only a small part about Edison and the imagery associated with him. What the reader learns from Wachhorst is how others described Edison.

It is clear from hints in Wachhorst's writing as well as from other books written about Edison that the inventor was very conscious of his own image and manipulated it to suit his purposes. Harold C. Passer, in his book on the electrical manufacturers, made it clear that Edison, particularly in his successful attempts to invent and market incandescent lighting, was a superb businessman who understood the market for his product and made his plans accordingly. It was no accident, therefore, that Edison's first central lighting system focused on Wall Street and featured an installation for J.P. Morgan. This gave Edison enormous prestige, publicity, and the indication of backing for his invention by America's premier financier. What is necessary to complete the picture of Edison and symbolism surrounding him is the part that Edison played in creating and manipulating his own image. For this, it is necessary to turn not to the 'Edison literature' but to the inventor's own papers. This Wachhorst does not do. Merely counting adjectives is an unsatisfactory way to analyze myth and symbol in American history.

In summary, Wachhorst's book tells us very little about Edison the man, quite a bit about how he was portrayed in the popular press, and almost nothing about how Edison viewed himself or attempted to project his image. There is still much to be said about this subject.

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